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OF "HAPPY DAYS"
NOW MOST HAPPY
IN JAZZ CLUBS

JUDITH LIGHT

Taking a bossy stance
on staying well
during the flu season

Photo courtesy of National Council on Aging

JUDITH LIGHT

Taking a bossy stance on the roles she has played, the service she has rendered, and the way to stay well during flu season

By David Laurell

Award-winning actress Judith Light has teamed up with the National Council on Aging to raise awareness about preventing influenza. She is currently serving as the national spokeswoman for The Flu + You program, a public education initiative aimed at adults 65 and over about the importance of annual flu vaccination and what preventative options are available.

Born in Trenton, New Jersey in 1949, Light graduated from Carnegie Mellon University with a degree in drama and made her professional stage debut in "Richard III" at the California Shakespeare Festival in 1970. First appearing on Broadway in the 1975 revival of "A Doll's House," she came to national prominence in 1977 when she took on the role of Karen Wolek on the ABC daytime drama "One Life to Live" for which, over her six-year run, she won two Daytime Emmy Awards for Outstanding Lead Actress in a Drama Series.

Perhaps best-known for her role as Angela Bower in the ABC sitcom "Who's the Boss?" which ran from 1984 to 1992, Light has also played the recurring role of Elizabeth Donnelly in the NBC drama "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit" and Claire Meade in the ABC series "Ugly Betty," for which she was nominated for a Primetime Emmy Award in 2007.

Light received her first nomination for a Tony Award in 2011 for her performance in the Broadway play "Lombardi," based on the life of legendary football coach Vince Lombardi. In 2012 and 2013, she won two consecutive Tony Awards for Best Featured Actress in a Play for her performances in "Other Desert Cities" and "The Assembled Parties."

After a short stint as the villainous Judith Brown Ryland in the TNT reboot of "Dallas," 2014 saw Light take on the role of Shelly Pfefferman in the critically acclaimed dark dramedy, "Transparent," for which she received a Critics' Choice Television Award nomination. Cast opposite Jeffrey Tambor in the Jill Soloway-created series, Light plays the ex-wife of a transgender character played by Tambor.

A longtime passionate activist of the LGBT community, Light, who played Ryan White's mother in the 1989 made-for-television movie "The Ryan White Story," sits on the board of the Matthew Shepard Foundation, as well as the Point Foundation, an LGBT organization that provides financial support, mentoring, leadership training and hope to meritorious students who are or feel marginalized due to their sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression.

Next month, Light will return to Broadway in the role of Madame Raquin in "Thérèse Raquin" a stage adaptation of the 1867 Emile Zola novel that will be presented by the Roundabout Theatre Company. As she prepared for her latest Broadway performance, one that will mark Keira Knightley's Broadway debut and begin previews on October 1, Light took time to talk with *Life After 50* about aging, how to stay well, especially during flu season, and the roles that have defined her career and life.

Photo by Jonathan W. Sidler

Life After 50 (LA50): Few actresses have taken on the roles of such diverse characters as you have throughout your career. Can we throw out a couple of them for you to share what comes to mind when you think of them?

Judith Light (JL): Sure.

LA50: Let's start at the beginning, with Karen Wolek.

JL: Taking the role of Karen changed my life. Before taking that role, I was seriously considering getting out of acting. Up until that time, I had only done one television role, on "Kojak." Everything else I had done was in theater. I was hesitant about taking the role of Karen at first. I never wanted to do television. I was a real snob back then. I only wanted to do theater or feature film work, and certainly didn't want to do a soap opera. But then I began to think about the people I could reach by doing it, and that there was no reason I couldn't bring the quality of work I had been doing in the theater to television. In retrospect, taking that role was one of the most powerful and life-changing choices of my life.

LA50: You say you were contemplating getting out of the business. What would have been the other career path you would have pursued?

JL: I seriously thought about becoming a psychologist or pursuing a career in law. I would have also been interested in working with children with learning difficulties or physical disabilities. There was always some sort of a service element that was involved in what I considered to be among my choices. That same desire, to be of service to others, was actually a part – a big part – in my decision to take the role of Karen. I thought it would be a way to present a character that was dissatisfied with her life, who suffered from low self-esteem, who was obsessed with searching for love and acceptance, and how she coped and survived.

LA50: Few woman were as different as Karen Wolek and Angela Bower. Tell us about Angela.

JL: Well, Angela represents another life-changing choice for me, because I always said I would never do a sitcom [laughs]. *Do you see a pattern here? Again, just like with doing a soap opera, my decision not to ever do a sitcom was due to the way I looked down my nose at that sort of material. I had never realized how powerful both of those mediums can be to reaching people. When I auditioned for that role with Tony* [Danza], *I realized I had been making decisions based on perceptions that were incorrect. When I decided to go with my gut, and accept that role – just like taking the role of Karen – it changed my life. Those roles opened my eyes to the fact that I had been making poor choices about a lot of things that were cutting me off from having wonderful and powerful experiences. I think the thing I learned from taking the role of Angela is how wonderful*

it is to have the opportunity in life to be able to make people laugh. That was the service element I found in taking that role – making people laugh. That is such a wonderful thing to do – an extraordinary thing to do as a career.

LA50: You had done comedic work in theater. Did that help prepare you for that role?

JL: I'll tell you, I learned so much from Tony about doing comedy. He gave me an education every week. By watching him and working with him, I learned timing and balance – the understanding – the underpinnings of what must be established before you can make something funny. He was a great teacher.

LA50: A successful television or film production stems from that inexplicable magical chemistry that occurs between actors. That was certainly the case with you and Tony.

JL: It was. We knew that right from the time we did the audition. It was very evident – just no question – everybody involved saw that. We had a great connection right from the start and continued to have that connection for the eight years the show ran. That is still true to this day. We are very close friends.

LA50: You said that had you not continued to act, you may have sought a career in law. You kind of got that by playing Elizabeth Donnelly on "Law & Order: Special Victims Unit." Tell us about her.

JL: The way the part of Elizabeth came to me was interesting. After being away from the theater for over 20 years, I was back in New York doing a play –

Photo by Jonathan W. Stoller

"Wit" ["W;t"]. I was playing the role of a woman who was dying of ovarian cancer, which I had taken over from Kathleen Chalfant. Many of the people who were working on "SVU," that Kathleen was a part of, came to see my performance and that led to my being offered the part of the head of the Special Victims Unit. Then I became a judge. I loved doing that role. It meant constantly flying back and forth from California to New York for several seasons, but that was fine because I loved it. That was a very special time for me, because I loved being involved with that show and playing that role. Playing Elizabeth was so different than anything I had ever done.

LA50: Tell us about Claire Meade.

JL: Again, another very different role. I had done a pilot about real estate agents. It was a great pilot, but it didn't go. But that was what led to my getting the role of Claire, who was a fascinating woman with all sorts of Achilles' heels and complications. Doing that show gave me the chance to work with my dear and wonderful America Ferrera, who has become a deeply cherished friend. We were all very much family on that show. Claire gave me the chance to go in a very different direction with a role and that was so great. It is so easy for an actress to get pigeonholed, but that never happened to me. That was because of my terrific management team. I've had wonderful people who have guided me to take on very different roles. That has been such a joy – to have such diversity in the roles I've done.

LA50: So here's the one I really want to hear about, because she is different from all the rest in that she was a real person – Marie Lombardi.

JL: Oh wow! How interesting that you would ask about her. She was a very special woman and you do have a huge responsibility when you are playing the role of a woman who actually lived and who still has family members alive, many who came to see the performance. I really did a lot of research on her and had many of her family members tell me how much I had her down. Even though that role was small, Marie was a dynamic and important part of that play.

LA50: Last woman I'll ask you about – Shelly Pfefferman.

JL: "Transparent" has captured my heart as both an actor and a viewer. I think it's so incredibly powerful to be doing a story that is in service to something greater than ourselves – opening eyes and hearts, and hopefully, minds to save lives – to open a conversation that gives people the gift of knowing what is your true, courageous, authentic self. Although the show is about a man transitioning to becoming a woman, the larger context of the story we are trying to present is a message to everyone that it is fine to be who you are – to present yourself to the world as you are – and to love yourself for who you are. People really relate to this show because every family has some sort of an issue that deals with something that turns their world upside down – that causes everyone to look at who they are and how they relate to each other or a situation or a world that they may be uncomfortable with – something they don't understand. I am very proud of what we do in "Transparent." During each table read, we all take a moment to be grateful for being able to be a part of this show that has the power to open eyes and hearts and minds.

LA50: You have always been a champion of the LGBT community. What was the impetus for that?

JL: During the early days of the AIDS epidemic – in the 1980s – I had seen people I had worked with die and I didn't know what was going on. Then it began to happen to close friends and I saw them being discounted because they were gay, and that was not okay with me. I remember when I was doing "The Ryan White Story" and Ryan, who had contracted HIV because he was a hemophiliac, came to the set one day and was being interviewed by a woman who asked him how he had been treated by people. He told her he had been spit upon and been called the "f" word – the derogatory one used for gay people. I was so devastated to hear this young boy talk about how cruel he had been treated by people. There was a mob mentality about the way people with HIV were being treated back then. That homophobic

Photo courtesy of National Council on Aging

response made me know I could not sit still without using my voice to come out and say something – to say how wrong this was. We had two presidents who would not even say the word "AIDS," although thousands of Americans were suffering from this disease. That makes you wonder what kind of a country we are living in. If there is a flood or a hurricane that affects a segment of our country, the government runs to help them with a big show. But with AIDS, it was nothing. There was a disdain and a discounting of Americans who had contracted AIDS because they were gay, or thought to be gay. That was deeply offensive to me – to anyone who cares about justice and the dignity of life. I was also very impressed with how the LGBT community rose up to powerfully care for their own during that time. Watching that was inspiring and beautiful to me.

LA50: You were one of the first LGBT advocates not of the community to come out in support of LGBT rights.

JL: I had to say something. The cruelty I saw was inhuman. And when I did, I got some horrible letters from people saying they would never watch anything I did again. I found that to be devastating, that people could be so cruel, but I had to finally come to terms with the fact that their bigotry and hatred was their problem to deal with – their cross to bear.

LA50: Let's talk about another cause you have embraced, influenza immunization.

JL: It is the same thing as my support of the LGBT community. My work is my service. I took the roles of Karen, and Angela and others to be of service to people. To me, everything I do has that context to it. I have always chosen roles to educate or expose issues or problems, or to make people laugh, so my work with the National Council on Aging is a natural extension of that – to educate people. I consider myself to be a reasonably educated and aware person, and yet I never knew there was a special flu shot for people 65 and older. So I thought: If I don't know about it, I bet there are a lot of people out there who don't know about it. Every year, people die from the flu and not enough people talk about it, so I really felt we need to be talking about and educating people about the strong vaccine that is available for older people and that you can go to a pharmacy and get it for free. I wanted to be a part of telling people to do this – to do something that may save their life. I know that may sound dramatic, but I was once one of those people who was irresponsible by not getting a flu shot and putting an entire cast and crew at risk.

LA50: So tell our readers what they should do.

JL: Go to the National Council on Aging website and get all the information. There is no reason for people to be getting the flu. You just have to be knowledgeable of what is available and then make it a priority to get the immunization. The flu season starts this month and runs through the winter, so now is the time to do it. During most flu seasons, it's estimated that 90 percent of seasonal flu-related deaths and between 50 and 60 percent of seasonal flu-related hospitalizations in the United States occur in people 65 years and older. This is because human immune defenses become weaker with age. So influenza can be a very serious disease for people 65 and older.

LA50: I'll take for granted you are dutifully immunized against influenza. Tell us what else you do to take care of yourself.

JL: In New York, I walk everywhere, which is my main form of exercise. My diet is gluten free and I am primarily vegetarian. If I ever feel that I'm not getting the protein I need, I will have some fish. I try to stay away from dairy, because I don't respond well to it. I just really try to listen to my body to hear what it is that I need. I have dieted in the past and always felt frustrated and deprived. I then came to realize that I had never really learned how to eat or to discern what I wanted or needed as opposed to a conditioned or compulsive need to eat.

Photo by Jonathan W. Sloller

So I retrained myself and have learned to be as conscious as I can be as to what foods I need or want.

LA50: Any guilty pleasures – moments when you are bad?

JL: I don't consider anything I eat to be bad. Ice cream is one of my favorite things and I will have a bite or two instead of eating an entire pint. I never deprive myself of anything I'm craving, but I do just take a few bites. That works for me, because I know I can eat whatever I want, just as long as I don't eat a lot of it. I had been an emotional eater for many years and by going into therapy, I learned food is something that is to be nutritious and to be enjoyed, not something to suffer over and cause anxiety. Being conscious about how I eat and treating myself with grace and kindness and compassion in how and what I eat has worked for me.

LA50: As you have gotten older, have you adopted any thoughts or a philosophy about aging?

JL: My manager, Herb Hamsher talks about what he calls "conscious aging." He says we should conscientiously observe ourselves and how the process of aging is personally affecting us. That philosophy, if that's what you want to call it, is about being self-aware and actively choosing to live in each moment. I don't mean any of this to sound like some pop culture self-help book, but what I do mean is that we should adopt an active consciousness of watching ourselves age and understanding how we should be treating ourselves and others as we get older. We should always be aware of who we are in the world and what our value is and to always grow in grace. Getting older is going to happen to all of us, so it's much better to get on the roller coaster of aging and enjoy the ride rather than being dragged behind it. Aging should be a process of being incredibly grateful for the gift of getting older – for having life. That is a precious gift that not everyone gets. Life should be full and exciting and filled with a great fullness of being alive. That only comes by continuing to grow and to be continually living a life of service to others, no matter what it is you do.

GET INFORMED ON STAYING WELL THIS FLU SEASON

"I need to stay healthy and can't let the flu slow me down, so I received my annual vaccination and learned there are different flu vaccine options for people 65 and older," says actress Judith Light. "I want to encourage others to speak with their doctor or pharmacist to find out more about simple steps they can take to help prevent the flu for themselves and the people they care about."

Research shows that the immune system weakens with age, which means older adults are more likely to catch the flu and that they can suffer greater complications because of other health issues. Through the National Council on Aging's Flu + You program, everyone can get the information they need to help protect themselves by getting vaccinated as early in the season as possible.

The flu is a contagious illness that can be severe and life-threatening, especially for adults 65 and older who have flu vaccine options, including the traditional, standard-dose vaccine and a higher-dose vaccine specifically designed to address the age-related weakening of the immune system. The higher-dose flu vaccine, which includes four times the antigen compared with the standard-dose vaccine, triggers the body to produce more antibody against the flu virus. Older adults should speak with their healthcare provider about the risk of catching the flu and how it can be prevented, including the best vaccine option for them. And remember: Flu vaccination is a Medicare Part B benefit, which means there is no copay for eligible beneficiaries.

The National Council on Aging is a respected leader and trusted partner to help people meet the challenges of aging. Through innovative community programs and services, online help, and advocacy, they are a trusted voice and innovative problem-solver helping people navigate the challenges of aging in America. For more facts about flu prevention, click on www.ncoa.org.

Photo courtesy of National Council on Aging